

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

Sponsored by the Virginia Green Industry Council

September 2007

A dry summer brings drought damage to our landscapes

By Jim May

We are at the end of a long, hot, dry summer in Virginia. Most areas of the state are in a moderate to severe drought situation and that is a bit troublesome. Not only are farmers affected by the loss of crops, but nursery owners, Christmas tree growers and anyone who raises plants and animals should be concerned.

August was particularly hot and dry. I know that going into the fall and winter with my landscape in such a water-deprived condition is not good and it forces me to change a few things I would normally be doing in the yard right now. My normal fall chore of lawn fertilization/broad-leaf weed control has been put on hold indefinitely.

Everywhere I go I see the effects of drought: tree leaves wilted and brown, vegetable gardens barely hanging on, annuals and perennials drooping and lawns gone dormant. My lawn has areas that go crunch when I walk on it, so I avoid doing so.

Some species of turf are more drought-tolerant than others. In general, of the cool-season grasses, the fine fescues (hard fescue, creeping red fescue and Chewing's fescue) are the most drought-tolerant, followed by tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass. Warm season grasses, such as Bermudagrass and zoysia, are, by their nature more drought tolerant, but the continuing lack of water isn't good for any plant.

Soil type and the age of the lawn can also be major factors in the survivability of turf. A newly established lawn on sandy soil for example would have a harder time surviving a drought than a well-established lawn on a loamy soil that has higher water holding capacity.

The ability of turfgrass to go dormant during a drought is a good thing. Wilting of turfgrass happens because the plant's internal water content drops so low that the plant cells cannot remain turgid and begin to shrivel.

Turfgrasses undergo a series of visible changes when they begin to wilt, starting with the development of bluish-green coloration and the rolling or folding of leaf blades. If you walk on the lawn and your footprints remain visible for several minutes, the turf is not very turgid and wilting is occurring. If the lawn isn't watered soon after these initial symptoms appear, dormancy and possible death can occur.

If you have areas of your lawn that are bare or dead, September is normally an excellent time to overseed the lawn. If the areas are small, just scratch them up with a steel rake or tiller and broadcast seed over the area. Apply a small amount of starter fertilizer and cover the area with straw to conserve moisture. Grass seed needs constant moisture to germinate successfully, so water lightly at least once a day for several weeks.

September is also typically the time of year to start fall fertilization of the lawn. I would hold off on that chore until we get some major rain, however. Fertilizer is a salt and can pull existing moisture away from plants and burn the roots as well as foliage. The same for fall weed control; wait for significant rain before proceeding.

Many trees and shrubs have suffered in the heat this summer also. Tree leaves will wilt and turn brown as drought continues. Some trees and deciduous shrubs will drop their leaves in response to dry conditions. This abscission of leaves is normal and doesn't mean the plant is dead, as many people fear.

By this time of year, all trees and shrubs should have formed buds for next year's growth. Try this simple test if you have doubts about whether your tree is alive or dead. Look for a bud on the smallest twig of the plant. If the bud is green, that's good. If the bud is brown and shriveled, that's not so good and indicates at least that part of the twig is dead. For a further test, take your thumbnail and gently scrape a thin layer of bark off the twig. If it is green underneath, that's good. Brown is bad and you should prune off the twig until you find a green area.

Mature trees and shrubs can survive drought conditions better than newly planted ones, of course. Continue to water any plants that were installed this year and make sure they have a good ring of mulch around them. Fall brings cooler weather; let's hope it also brings some much needed rain.

As I write this column, I learned of the passing of a dear friend, Olen Sharron. After a career with the USDA, he retired to the New River Valley and became a Certified Arborist, specializing in protecting the beautiful Hemlock trees from the ravages of the hemlock woolly adelgid, an imported insect that is decimating this beautiful native species. Olen was a soft-spoken gentleman who was passionate about his love for his family and about saving trees. He will be missed.